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review

A Literary Treasure of Epic Import

Vaars are a valuable part of Punjabi poetry -- a folk perception of history and an expression of popular will in celebration or revolt

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Title: Des Diyan Vaaran (Punjabi)

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Though great poets like Baba Nanak, Najabat and Shah Mohammad have also penned them, a bulk of 'Vaars' including elegies of heroes like Dulla Bhatti, originate from folklore. Folk itself can stem from an eclectic variety of sources, such as a group or a people's collective memory and verses by unknown bards. In Des Diyan Vaaran, the poets are mentioned by their names and, although professional bards of a humble caste, they possess great substance. Regardless of a variety of sources in this genre, it is a valuable treasure in Punjabi poetry, a folk perception of history, an expression of popular will in celebration or revolt.

'Vaar', which literally means an era/period, is a historical account composed in poetry, sung and performed and generally transmitted -- orally -- from generation to generation. Yet, despite its great value, currently very little of it is being documented or published in book form. Our new media has killed the folk performances; it doesn't care much for history or good art.

Similarly, the publishing of Vaar books in the 'qissa' market, a thriving market till fifty years ago, has dried up. Dr Saeed Khawar Bhutta has done some pioneering work in this field. Both Dr Bhutta whose research and labour went into the making of the book, and the publishing house (Punjabi Institute of Language, Art and Culture) deserve our gratitude.

Dr Bhutta has had the good fortune of having worked for a few years under the guidance of the great Punjabi scholar, late Prof Asaf Khan. He has also learnt from many a great teacher including Najam Hosain Syed. He acknowledges his debt to these worthy men of letters in the book.

Punjabi, the fourteenth major language of the world, according to the UN figures, is suffering an utter neglect in Pakistan. In East Punjab, where it is a medium of instruction from class one up to the masters level, it is equally threatened by the English language and



domination of the media by other languages. The difference between West and East Punjab is colossal. There dozens of Punjabi dailies and magazines are published and read by hundreds of thousands while only half a dozen financially struggling magazines and two minor dailies are published in Pakistan. The tragedy of East Punjab is that all the great names of Punjabi language belonged to areas that now fall in Pakistan. The abode of all classical Punjabi poets and the dialect used by them is that of West Punjab.

West Punjab's another shortfall is a lack of recording, documentation and publishing of this disappearing treasure. As an expert in this field, Dr Bhutta is an asset of national importance. His first book, titled Kuliat-e-Shah Azim, was published 15 years ago by Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board. He has written nine books since then and except for one book -- that of his own short stories -- the rest are a valuable anthology of folk songs and narrations of history and literature.

Dr Bhutta, besides teaching full-time at the University of Punjab and writing for Punjabi magazines, spends time in the field where he found and recorded master narrators of Punjabi folk such as (the late) Mian Kamal Din. The book under review includes four Vaars narrated by Mir Chughatta and one each by Mir Bahram and Mian Jani. The narrations and poetry are written records of oral narrations of seventeenth, eighteenth and early twentieth century. Also included are dramatic and artistic introductions by these three masters. In addition to the introductory narrations, there are lengthy interjections in each episode of these stories. There are two Vaars about the chief of the Chaddhar tribe; the spelling of this Jat clan (Chaddarer) that lives on the borders of district Jhang/Gujranwala/Sheikupura along the banks of River Chenab. Noora, the chief of Chaddhar clan, remained a popular folk hero in the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. Dara Shikoh, the brother of Emperor Aurangzeb, and Shahdat Khan Lakhera, a chief mentioned in these narratives, help fix the time. With the kings, governors (Sawan Mal of Multan province and his son Moolraj) and better known as local rulers e.g. the Sials of Jhang, you can fix the dates of these Vaars.

The Vaars were sung in rhythms of 'Sarkhandi' and 'Roshni' and apparently free-flowing but characteristic rhythms of 'Dholas'. Who were these authors? They were 'mirasees', the clan of musical performers and keepers of 'shajras' (family trees) of major clans. But, despite their low caste, these performers were very creative and imaginative. Theirs is a centuries old tradition. There are good reasons to believe that when our Hindu ancestors converted to Islam, the Brahmins with their rich heritage of musical arts, narratives and family records became 'mirasees'.

The Muslim rulers already had their own crop of 'Muslim Brahmins', i.e., the Mullahs and the Syeds. Ramu Brahmin (bahman) in Heer Damodhar and Karmoo Bahman in Mirza Sahiban are significant examples. Nobody notices that aristocratic Sahti elopes with Ramu Bahman in Heer Damodhar and Karmu Bahman tries to flirt with Sahiban in the poet Peelu's Mirza Sahiban. The last of these wise oral historian bards, Mian Kamal Din lived in the twentieth century and died in the twenty-first century. It was again Dr Saeed Bhutta who collected his masterpiece narratives in the book, aptly titled, Kamal Kahani.

Two Vaars of Noora Chaddhar included here are by Mir Bahram and Mian Jani. These masters truly deserve the title of 'Mir' (The Chief) and 'Mian' (The Master). These are now only used for religious teachers -- Syed/Pirs and elders. But none deserves the sobriquet better than Mian Jani and Mian Kamal Din.

What are these Vaars? These are folk history -- as perceived and remembered by the people. History is the essence of any language. This is the soul of Punjabi language, rich in phraseology, poetic, witty, ironic; felt by the people, the characters and these master narrators.

The passage of four centuries of these vaars, orally transmitted and sung, is a significant phenomenon in Punjabi history. The descendants of the authors preserved these narratives, performances were interjected by prose narratives that are masterpieces of Punjabi prose narratives; eloquent and dramatic. This performed prose is called 'vichar' (thoughts), and these are thought-provoking indeed!

The tragedy is that there are no takers. The language of these vaars is Lehndi, spoken by the majority of Punjabis, also called Seraiki, but it may not be followed by those living in Lahore.

It was Zia's time. We stopped the mass publication of Farid, Nanak, Damodhar, Shah Hussain, Bahu, Barkhurdar, Bullah, Waris, Sachal and (Khawaja) Farid because all of them, except Nanak, had written in Lehndi for the most part. Nanak also breaks into Lehndi at places. The tragedy is that we have stopped reading Punjabi in any dialect in Pakistan. Yes, today, we have the advantage of a very powerful media -- TV, computer, mobile phone etc. But how much air time or thought do they give to the Punjabi language?

For the information of the readers, vaars are difficult to read and understand. I, too, had to return to dictionary time and again.

Scholarship in Punjabi language is a thing of the past. The Punjabi scholars in Pakistan are an endangered species. As a member of this 'endangered species,' Dr Bhutta ought to be protected. He is a teacher and may inspire and train some people, as he was inspired by his own mentors.

The other four vaars are all by Mir Chughatta -- about Bhattis, Balochis, Mangesas, Awans and Laleras and Niswanas. Apparently, these are about clan battles and cattle lifting. The vaars provide the backdrop to the thousand years old history of Punjab.

Punjab, with the advent of the Persian wheel, was coming out of the pastoral into a settled village-based agricultural era: Another chapter to the intensive agriculture era was added by the canal network of the British era. Other than the canal districts, every big village in the Punjab boasts a thousand years of history. How can we know this history without knowing the language and its literature? In Pakistani villages we are moving into an 'age of barrenness' -- agricultural barrenness and cultural barrenness!

There is a surprising role played by the so-called 'Kammees' -- the lower castes -- in these vaars. On the face of it, vaars are epic tales of the feudal chiefs and heroes. But in all the battles these Kammees appear by name as warrior heroes: For instance, Mammo Mochi (Mammo the cobbler -- Page 17), Gahna Maachi (Gahna the fisherman/tandoor-keeper -- Page 157), Khakhrana Mochi (Khakhrana the cobbler -- Page 160) and Masti Maachi (potter) in another episode (Page 168).

It is likely that there are other, lower-caste characters whose caste did not form part of their name. When one reads the first Kammees name, it takes you by surprise. Mir Chughatta went on to sing the praises of his bravery. No doubt the Kammees are used as

petty criminal hands by the feudals today as well, but the characters in these vaars are a different variety. The British went on to brand some of these pastorals as criminal tribes.

Ignorance can be native as well as imperial! But read the narrative again and other than the name of the father of the character there is no mention of bravery by caste, e.g. a Brave Bhatti Rajput, Jat or Awan. Most are Jat tribes in these vaars but some claim to be Rajputs at the same time. The participation of the lower castes is not incidental. The pastoral Punjab was definitely classless and casteless in essence. It was only the royal connection and the settled agricultural village that brought the caste system in.

The study of caste system in the history of Punjab would be a complex exercise. It is not for nothing that this region of Punjab in Rig Ved is mentioned as people who believed in nothing; not in the Aryan god of Varn (Colour/Caste)! Read these vaars even if it takes an effort. They are a priceless gift! Both Dr. Saeed Khawar Bhutta and the Institute of Punjabi Language, Art and Culture deserve laurels for this effort.